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Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East

Edited by

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Chapter Eight

Khomeini's Messengers: The Disputed Pilgrimage of Islam

Martin Kramer

According to the tradition of Islam, Mecca during the annual Muslim pilgrimage is a city open to all Muslims, in which all forms of strife and bloodshed are forbidden. The peace of Mecca is a concept so rooted in Arabia that it even predates Islam and was observed by sojourners in Mecca before the Arabian shrine became the center of Muslim faith. But in 1987 Mecca became a site of unprecedented carnage when demonstrating Iranian pilgrims clashed with Saudi security forces in a bloody confrontation that claimed over 400 lives. The Saudis and their supporters called the event a premeditated riot: violent Iranian demonstrators crushed themselves to death in a stampede of their own making. The Iranians and their sympathizers call it a premeditated massacre: the Saudis conspired to provoke and shoot Iranian pilgrims. The following year, 1988, Mecca was transformed into an armed camp as tense Saudi security forces patrolled a pilgrimage from which Iranian pilgrims were excluded. The pilgrimage to Mecca, far from providing a respite from the conflicts that beset Islam, itself became a point of confrontation between rival visions of Islam. The pilgrimage peace has been shattered by the brickbats and bullets of Muslims.

The disruption of the pilgrimage peace admits multiple interpretations. It occurred at a moment of escalating tensions in the Iranian-Iraqi war, following the reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers and the introduction of foreign escorts in the Persian Gulf. This foreign intervention, favored by Saudi Arabia and opposed by Iran, created an atmosphere of crisis between the two states. Yet, the deterioration of the pilgrimage also expressed tensions dating back to Iran's revolution, an event that kindled a broader rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran over primacy in the Persian Gulf and in Islam. That conflict has its remoter origins in the great historical animosity of Wahhabism, the fount of Saudi Islam, to Shi^{c}ism itself. Nor can the most recent

pilgrimage strife be divorced from the history of mistrust between Shiᶜite pilgrims and their Sunni hosts, a history that stretches back as far as the sixteenth century. At a still deeper level, the event echoed Sunni-Shiᶜite animosities that have their origins in the seventh century, at the very dawn of Islam.

Even if it is allowed that the Persian Gulf crisis triggered the violence of 1987 and the coercive measures of 1988, both have been understood by Muslims in a larger historical context. Much of that understanding is implicit and unspoken, because it is essentially sectarian. Sectarian bigotry dares not speak its name openly: like racial and ethnic prejudice in other societies, sectarian prejudice is not professed openly in the Muslim world. "They are now propagandizing and claiming that this incident was a war between Shiᶜis and Sunnis," charged Iranian president Ali Khamene'i after the 1987 violence. "This is a lie! Of course there is a war; but a war between the American perception of Islam and true revolutionary Islam."[1]

The pilgrimage controversy is not merely one between Shiᶜites and Sunnis, nor is it simply between Khomeini's truth and America's falsehood. It is a conflict that is simultaneously political and sectarian, that combines a present-day clash of interests with the historic clash of sects in Islam. Some of these sectarian differences touch upon the Muslim pilgrimage itself and involve conflicting notions of sanctity and asylum. The aim of this chapter is to understand the interaction of present politics with the enduring prejudices that Saudis and Iranians bring to Mecca.

Between Sunnis and Shiᶜis

The pilgrimage ritual itself is not an issue about which Sunnis and Shiᶜites have conducted an elaborate polemic. The bedrock of sectarian conflict has always been the matter of the imamate; the question of legitimate authority in Islam, which is a matter of theological controversy outside the ritual sphere. Yet over time, theological differences were transformed into political, social, and cultural differences, and these infected both sects with bigoted lore about Shiᶜite pilgrims and Sunni hosts. This was particularly evident after Sunni-Shiᶜite differences took the form of Ottoman-Safavid armed conflict, beginning in the sixteenth century. That was perhaps the most divided century in Islamic history, marked by great wars of religion between Sunnis and Shiᶜites. When the holy cities were under Sunni Ottoman rule, Shiᶜites from Safavid domains were banned from pilgrimage for

years. The Safavids reacted by trying to discourage the pilgrimage to Mecca and emphasizing the importance of Shi^{c}ite shrines in their own domains.[2]

The Sunni corpus of libel perhaps is more readily documented, if only because it sometimes led to violent acts against Shi^{c}ite pilgrims. At the root of the Sunni lore is the belief that Shi^{c}ites feel themselves compelled to pollute the holy premises. Much evidence for Sunni belief in this libel can be found in both Islamic textual sources and European travel literature. This pollution was said to take a particularly repelling form: Burckhardt and Burton, the great nineteenth-century explorers of Arabia, both heard about attacks on Shi^{c}ite pilgrims, prompted by the suspicion that they had polluted the Great Mosque in Mecca with excrement. According to Burton, "their ill-fame has spread far; at Alexandria they were described to me as a people who defile the Ka^{c}bah."[3]

The Shi^{c}ite libel was just as farfetched. It held that Sunnis did not respect Mecca as a sanctuary, and that the lives of Shi^{c}ite pilgrims were forfeit even in these sacred precincts, where the shedding of blood is forbidden. Shi^{c}ite pilgrims were indeed liable to humiliation at any time; as Burton wrote of Shi^{c}ites on pilgrimage, "that man is happy who gets over it without a beating, [for] in no part of Al-Hijaz are they for a moment safe from abuse and blows."[4] Yet it would seem that, for the most part, Shi^{c}ite pilgrims were as secure as other pilgrims, provided they exercised the discretion (*taqiyya*) permitted them by Shi^{c}ite doctrine and conformed with the customs of their Sunni hosts. During the Ottoman period, the Iranian pilgrims' caravan also bought its security through a special tribute, paid both to desert tribes en route and to the guardians of the sanctuaries.[5] Since toleration could be had at a price which Shi^{c}ite pilgrims were prepared to pay, their lives were rarely as threatened as their dignity. The open manner in which Shi^{c}ites observed Muharram in Jidda epitomized the tolerance of the later Ottoman years. When the Dutch Orientalist Hurgronje witnessed these ceremonies in 1884, he found the Ottoman governor in attendance. Hurgronje reported that the governor "not only drank sherbet but also wept piously."[6]

But sectarian antagonisms were exacerbated following the advent of Saudi rule over Mecca in 1924. The doctrinal divide that separated Ottoman Sunnism from Shi^{c}ism seemed narrow in comparison to the chasm that separated Saudi Wahhabism and Shi^{c}ism. Wahhabi doctrine regarded Shi^{c}ite veneration of the Imams and their tombs as blasphemous idolatry. The Wahhabi iconoclasts had earned lasting notoriety in Shi^{c}ite eyes when they emerged from the Arabian desert in

1802 and sacked Karbala, the Shiᶜite shrine city in Iraq. They slew several thousand Shiᶜites on that occasion, and desecrated the revered tomb of the Imam Husayn, whose martyrdom in the seventh century is the pivotal event in Shiᶜite religious history. Those Shiᶜites who perished became martyrs in the eyes of their coreligionists, sacrificed on the very site of Husayn's martyrdom.[7]

When a revived Wahhabi movement swept through Arabia during the first quarter of this century, it appeared as hostile as ever to Shiᶜism's most fundamental assumptions. The leader of the movement, ᶜAbd al-ᶜAziz Ibn Saᶜud, when asked in 1918 about the Shiᶜite shrines in Iraq, could still declare that "I would raise no objection if you demolished the whole lot of them, and I would demolish them myself if I had the chance."[8] He never had that chance, but he did besiege and occupy Medina, and his bombardment of the city produced a general strike in Iran and an uproar throughout the Shiᶜite world. For whereas the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca holds the same significance for Sunnis and Shiᶜites, the visitation (*ziyara*) to nearby Medina is of special significance for Shiᶜites. The cemetery of al-Baqiᶜ, near the city, is the reputed resting place of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima and four of the Twelve Imams. It was the Shiᶜite practice at this cemetery to pray for their intercession with God.[9] The Wahhabis, for whom prayer through these intercessors represented a form of idolatry, had leveled much of this cemetery in 1806, during an earlier occupation of Medina, but its domed tombs had been rebuilt by the end of the century. Now the Saudis, in their purifying zeal, again demolished al-Baqiᶜ, a move regarded by Shiᶜites as desecration of their hallowed shrines.[10]

The demolition created such profound sentiment in Iran, especially in religious circles, that the Iranian government refused to recognize Ibn Saᶜud's rule.[11] Instead, Iran demanded that a general assembly of Muslims be created to regulate the holy cities, while a Shiᶜite conference convened in Lucknow, India, called upon all Muslims to use every possible means to expel Ibn Saᶜud from the Hijaz.[12] Denial of recognition was combined, in 1927, with a decision by Iran to forbid the pilgrimage to its nationals, as an act of protest against the alleged intolerance of the Wahhabis and their destruction of tombs.[13] Still, the ban failed to discourage the most determined pilgrims from Iran, who continued to arrive via Iraq and Syria. And in a pragmatic step, Ibn Saᶜud moved to defuse the extensive Shiᶜite agitation against him by a show of tolerance designed to win official Iranian recognition. Shiᶜite pilgrims from Arab lands met with

exemplary treatment during the year in which Iran imposed the ban, and Iran's ulama soon were demanding the restored right to perform the pilgrimage.

In 1928, Iran lifted the pilgrimage ban, and in 1929 Iran and Ibn Saᶜud's kingdom concluded a treaty of friendship. Article Three of the treaty guaranteed that Iran's pilgrims would enjoy treatment identical to that of pilgrims from other countries, and that they would not be prevented from observing their own religious rites.[14] Iran's pilgrims came to enjoy a measure of toleration that reflected the pragmatism of Ibn Saᶜud on Shiᶜite matters, an approach that also guided his policy toward his own Shiᶜite minority in the east of his kingdom. Ibn Saᶜud, in both hosting and ruling over Shiᶜites, now asked only that they avoid public enactment of distinctly Shiᶜite rituals. In less than a decade, a pattern of tolerance seemed to have been firmly established.[15]

All the more striking, then, was a serious recurrence of the Sunni libel of Shiᶜite defilement. In 1943, a Saudi religious judge ordered an Iranian pilgrim beheaded for allegedly defiling the Great Mosque with excrement supposedly carried into the mosque in his pilgrim's garment. Ibn Saᶜud remarked to some Americans that "this was the kind of offense which might be expected of Iranians." The verdict in local coffee houses held that "the Iranians always act that way."[16] The incident, which infuriated religious opinion in Iran, culminated in an official Iranian protest and a demand for payment of an indemnity. Iran even severed diplomatic relations. The Iranian press indulged in a campaign of anti-Wahhabi polemic shriller than anything published since Ibn Saᶜud's conquest of Mecca. Once again, tales of Wahhabi barbarism were retold, and the story of the sacking of Karbala was recounted with anguish and embellishment. The government of Iran imposed another pilgrimage ban, which it lifted only in 1948, after the dust of controversy had settled.

The pilgrimage controversy became dormant again following the political rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran during the 1960s, which was the outcome of shared apprehension over Egyptian-sponsored subversion. Theologians on both sides of the divide continued to publish intolerant polemical attacks and legal opinions directed against the rival variety of Islam. Yet, the doctrinal disagreement was accompanied by a steady increase in the number of Iranian pilgrims, thanks to the introduction of a direct air service for pilgrims. The number of Iranian pilgrims rose steadily from 12,000 in 1961 to 57,000 in 1972.

The Pilgrimage Reinterpreted

This influx coincided with the appearance of an introspective and overtly political genre of Iranian writing on the pilgrimage. The radical Iranian publicist Ali Shariati, in his book *Hajj*, sought deeper meaning in the Meccan pilgrimage in his quest for a solution to contemporary Islam's broader philosophical and political dilemmas. Shariati urged the pilgrims "to study the dangers and consequences of the superpowers and their agents who have infiltrated Muslim nations. They should resolve to fight against brainwashing, propaganda, disunity, heresy, and false religions."[17]

In 1971, several Iranians were arrested in Mecca for distributing a message to Muslim pilgrims from one Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Najf, the Shi^{c}ite shrine city in Iraq:

> At this sacred pilgrimage gathering, the Muslims must exchange their views concerning the basic problems of Islam and the special problems of each Muslim country. The people of each country should, in effect, present a report concerning their own state to the Muslims of the world, and thus all will come to know what their Muslim brothers are suffering at the hands of imperialism and its agents.

Khomeini then presented his own scathing "report" on Iran, describing it as "a military base for Israel, which means, by extension, for America."[18]

After 1971, hardly a year passed during which some Iranians did not distribute a similar message from Khomeini to Muslim pilgrims. The effort usually met with Saudi apathy, for the Saudis did not regard this preaching as directed against themselves. Khomeini worded his annual pilgrimage message in such a way as to appeal to Iranian pilgrims and to alert other pilgrims to the "shameful, bloody, so-called White Revolution" of the Shah. Such propaganda was liable to complicate Saudi relations with the Shah's Iran, so Saudi authorities took measures against the more brazen distributors of Khomeini's messages. But the Saudis did not regard these few troublesome Iranians as a serious threat to their own standing as rulers of Islam's holiest sanctuaries. Khomeini himself performed the pilgrimage in 1973, without incident.

But the truly radical feature of Shi^{c}ite doctrine as expounded both by Khomeini and Shariati was their abrogation of the Shi^{c}ite principle of discretion (*taqiyya*) during the pilgrimage, a discretion that generally

had been reciprocated by Saudi tolerance. By urging their followers to view the pilgrimage as a political rite, they set Shi^{c}ites apart from other pilgrims, with serious consequences for the fragile tolerance that the Saudis had displayed. The new preaching upset the delicate balance that preserved the pilgrimage peace, by urging a line of action that implicitly underlined differences between Shi^{c}ite pilgrims and Sunni hosts.

Following the Iranian revolution, Iran sought to act on the principles elaborated by Khomeini, by appealing directly to the Muslim pilgrims of other lands through political activity during the pilgrimage.[19] The process of politicization was gradual. In 1979, Iran's pilgrims engaged in no more than light propagandizing, and in 1980 Iran organized a much reduced pilgrimage, due to the outbreak of war with Iraq. But large demonstrations, resulting in violent clashes with Saudi police, first took place in 1981, when Iranian pilgrims began to chant political slogans in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina and the Great Mosque in Mecca. Saudi security forces acted against the Iranians in both mosques, and a subsequent clash in the Prophet's Mosque resulted in the death of an Iranian pilgrim. In 1982, the Iranian pilgrimage took an even more radical turn, when Khomeini appointed Hujjat al-Islam Musavi-Khoiniha as his pilgrimage representative. Khoiniha was the mentor of the students who had seized the United States Embassy in Tehran. Saudi police clashed with demonstrators whom he addressed in both Medina and Mecca. In Mecca he was arrested, and a speech delivered in Medina after the pilgrimage earned him expulsion as an "instigator."

This renewed conflict intensified the polemical debate over the pilgrimage. The debate itself was not a simple repetition of the old libels but was transformed and made more credible, so that it no longer expressed sectarian distrust so much as it evoked it. This transformation probably reflected the influence of ecumenism upon the intellectual climate of contemporary Islam, a climate now inhospitable to overt sectarian polemics. For most Muslims, it is no longer considered politic to dwell openly on the differences between Sunni and Shi^{c}ite Islam. Indeed, merely to cite these differences is regarded by many Shi^{c}ites as an attempt to isolate them, and even as part of an imperialist plot to foment division in Islam. The new sectarianism takes a subtler form: Shi^{c}ites profess their unity of purpose with Sunnis, but then declare that a major expression of Sunnism (in this case, Saudi Wahhabism) is a deviation from ecumenical Islam. Sunnis declare their acceptance of Shi^{c}ites as Muslims, but then declare that a major

expression of Shi^{c}ism (in this case, Khomeini's revolutionary activism) constitutes a deviation from ecumenical Islam.

In this manner, sectarian prejudice is insinuated, even as the unity of Islam is openly professed. This is precisely how the lines of argument in the new pilgrimage polemic insinuated the libels of yesteryear—most perfectly in the brief correspondence between the late Saudi King Khalid and Imam Khomeini in October 1981, at a time of violent clashes in Mecca and Medina between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi police.[20] Khalid compiled a revealing letter of protest to Khomeini, asking that Khomeini urge his followers to show restraint, but strongly hinting that the Great Mosque had been defiled by blasphemous Iranian pilgrims. According to Khalid, Iranian pilgrims in the Great Mosque had performed their ritual circumambulations while chanting "God is great, Khomeini is great," and "God is one, Khomeini is one." There was no need for Khalid to elaborate on this charge. It was obvious that the Iranian's slogans constituted an excessive veneration of their Imam, a form of blasphemous polytheism. All this had aroused the "dissatisfaction and disgust" of other pilgrims, wrote Khalid to Khomeini.

In fact, Khalid's letter distorted well-known Iranian revolutionary slogans. Iranian pilgrims had actually chanted "God is great, Khomeini is leader." The Saudis had confused the Persian word for "leader" (*rahbar*) with the rhyming Arabic for "great" (*akbar*). And the pilgrims' Arabic chant declared that "God is one, Khomeini is leader." Here, the Saudis had confused the Arabic for "one" (*wahid*) with the rhyming Arabic for "leader" (*qa'id*). There was a vast difference between the slogans as actually chanted by the Iranians and the inadvertent or deliberate misrepresentations of Khalid. In the actual slogans, Khomeini is cast as a leader unrivaled in the world, but subordinate to an almighty God. In the slogans as reported by the Saudis, Khomeini is placed on one plane with God, a verbal pollution of Islam's holiest sanctuary. This familiar but disguised charge of Shi^{c}ite defilement, the Saudis sought to level at Iran's pilgrims. The accusation gained credibility from the formerly widespread Sunni conviction that the Shi^{c}ites are bound to pollute the Great Mosque.

In his reply to Khalid, Khomeini evoked the old Shi^{c}ite libel, charging the Saudis with failing to respect the refuge provided by the Great Mosque. "How is it that the Saudi police attack Muslims with jackboots and weapons, beat them, arrest them, and send them to prisons from inside the holy mosque, a place which according to the teaching of God and the text of the Qur'an, is refuge for all, even

deviants?" This was a decidedly Shiᶜite reading of the meaning of the Great Mosque's sanctity, which owed a great deal to the concept of refuge (*bast*) that traditionally applied to Shiᶜite shrines in Iran. Such shrines were indeed absolutely inviolable places of refuge, where any kind of malefactor could find asylum.[21]

Nothing could have been further from the Wahhabi-Saudi concept of the sanctity of the holy places, regarded as sites so sacred that no deviation at all may be allowed in their precincts. Only from a Shiᶜite perspective did this Saudi concern for preserving the purity of the Great Mosque appear as blind disrespect. In 1979, the Saudis had acted in good conscience to clear the Great Mosque of "deviants," relying upon a *fatwa* issued by over thirty other men of religion, who argued that it was permissible to dislodge the defilers even by force of arms. This decision enjoyed wide Muslim support beyond Saudi Arabia, and Khomeini's presentation of the Great Mosque as a place in which even "deviants" enjoyed absolute immunity could only be regarded as peculiarly Shiᶜite, since it relied upon a Shiᶜite concept of inviolable refuge that knows no parallel in Sunni Islam.

Differing concepts of sanctity also affected that part of the pilgrimage controversy played out in Medina. In 1982, Khomeini's representative to the pilgrimage chose the cemetery of al-Baqiᶜ in Medina as the site for a series of demonstrations combined with visitation prayers. After the Saudi demolition of the shrines in the cemetery in 1926, al-Baqiᶜ ceased to serve as a place of Shiᶜite visitation. But after Iran's Islamic revolution, the formal prayers were reinstated against Saudi will and were recited outside the high wall that the Saudis had built to seal off the cemetery.[22] In 1986, in a concession to Iran's pilgrims, Saudi authorities allowed them access to the cemetery itself, and Khomeini's representative to the pilgrimage formally thanked Saudi King Fahd for permitting the return of Shiᶜite pilgrims to the venerated site. This obsessive interest in al-Baqiᶜ and other tombs, and the resort to the cemetery as a rallying point for pilgrims in Medina, reflected an especially Shiᶜite notion of Medina's sanctity and served to evoke past resentment against the Saudis for having defaced the memory of the Imams.

This heightened Shiᶜite interest in Medina also owed a great deal to changes in the spiritual geography of Shiᶜite Islam. After the outbreak of the war between Iran and Iraq, it was no longer possible for Iranians to visit the Shiᶜite shrine cities in Iraq and the tombs of the Imams in their sacred precincts. For the great mass of Shiᶜites, the pilgrimage to these sites in Iraq had taken precedence over the pilgrimage

to Mecca and the visitation to Medina. Their inaccessibility greatly enhanced the significance for Iranian Shi^{c}ism of the holy cities of Arabia, and by 1988 over 1 million Iranians had made application to Iranian authorities to conduct the pilgrimage to the holy cities in Arabia.[23] As a result, al-Baqi^{c} emerged again as a major Shi^{c}ite center of pilgrimage, and mass prayer services were conducted there after Iran's revolution, not by the Saudi men of religion who manage the mosques in Mecca and Medina, but by visiting Shi^{c}ite clerics.

The Pilgrimage Understanding

Such identifiably Shi^{c}ite themes and methods of protest might have blinded other pilgrims to the political message of liberation that Iran wished to convey during the pilgrimage. The fear that Iran's message might simply be dismissed by other Muslims as Shi^{c}ite dissent was responsible for some of the ecumenical intonations of Khomeini's pilgrimage representatives and other Shi^{c}ite clerics. Most notably, Khomeini's representatives instructed Iran's pilgrims to pray with all other pilgrims behind the Sunni prayer leaders in the Great Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque, lest they stand out for their Shi^{c}ism rather than their political activism.

This restraint, matched by a parallel Saudi restraint in dealing with Iran's pilgrims, left the impression that the pilgrimage had been defused. The climate of confrontation dissipated in 1983; although tensions remained high, only minor incidents marred the pilgrimage peace in that and subsequent years. By 1986, it seemed that Iran and Saudi Arabia had reached a compromise permitting Iran to conduct a limited measure of political propaganda during the pilgrimage. By the informal terms of the pilgrimage understanding, Khomeini's pilgrimage representative was permitted to organize two pilgrims' rallies, the first in Medina and the second in Mecca, in areas removed from the holy mosques in each city. A number of understandings restricted the form and content of these demonstrations. Iran's pilgrims were not to import or display printed matter and posters of a political nature, and their slogans were to be directed only against the United States, the Soviet Union, and Israel. Other Muslim governments and the host government were not to be criticized. This understanding allowed Iran's pilgrims to vent their views, but enabled Saudi authorities to confine all demonstrating to two fixed events. It also made possible a sizeable increase in the number of Iranian pilgrims.

In 1986, a group of Iranian pilgrims who opposed the strategy of moderation in dealing with Saudi Arabia arrived in the country with a large quantity of high explosives in their suitcases. Their aim was to destroy the pilgrimage understanding reached between Iran and Saudi Arabia—but they failed. Saudi airport authorities discovered the explosives and arrested over 100 pilgrims upon their arrival. Those Iranian leaders who had assured Saudi Arabia that the pilgrimage peace would be preserved were embarrassed and dissociated themselves from the plot by allowing the Saudis to detain the pilgrims for weeks without protest. But the plotters enjoyed the support of one of the major factions in Iran—that which opposed the pursuit of any opening toward the Saudis and favored the aggressive export of the revolution. In the pilgrimage plot of 1986, it became clear that the pilgrimage peace was an unstable one, affected by the changing balance in Iran's internal power struggle.

Iranian Pilgrims, 1979–1988

1979	75,000
1980	10,000
1981	75,000
1982	85,000
1983	100,000
1984	150,000
1985	150,000
1986	150,000
1987	150,000
1988	0

The heightened political tensions of 1987 surrounding the introduction of United States naval forces into the Persian Gulf did not immediately threaten the pilgrimage understanding. Nonetheless, Saudi authorities were alarmed by a speech made at the beginning of July by Hujjat al-Islam Musavi-Khoiniha, Khomeini's former pilgrimage representative. Khoiniha had presided over the most turbulent pilgrimage seasons. His replacement as pilgrimage supervisor and his appointment as prosecutor general in 1985 was probably intended to reduce the chances of confrontation in Mecca. But he was still a powerful figure in Iran and a champion of extremists who opposed all limitations on Iran's pilgrims. His speech was plainly provocative.

This year, he declared, "a mere march or demonstration will not suffice." Iran should not simply "gather a certain number of people who might support the views of the Islamic republic." Khoiniha demanded that Saudi Arabia allow Khomeini's pilgrimage representative to enter the Great Mosque in Mecca for one night, and there conduct a referendum among the throngs of pilgrims over the decision of the amir of Kuwait to invite foreign escorts for Kuwaiti tankers. At the same time, Khomeini's representative would explain Iran's case in the war. "All we ask is that the Saudi Government not oppose this, nor send its guards to the Great Mosque. Let us see what happens. We will try it for one year."[24]

Saudi authorities now had grounds to suspect that some of Iran's pilgrims might attempt a takeover of the Great Mosque, as a political maneuver to embarrass Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United States. Khoiniha's statement touched off a raw nerve and immediately elicited a warning from an unnamed official source in Saudi Arabia. The source noted that Saudi Arabia supported numerous other forums for the expression of Muslim opinion on various matters, even during the pilgrimage. But such consultations in the Great Mosque would constitute an innovation in Islam, and "anyone who attempts to innovate in Islam will go to hell." Saudi Arabia would shoulder its responsibility for safeguarding the Islamic shrines in Mecca and Medina.[25] Khoiniha's statement put the Saudi security apparatus on a high state of alert and lent more credence to inevitable rumors that the Iranians planned a violent confrontation.

However, Khoiniha's demand did not figure in the negotiations between the Saudi Ministry of Pilgrimage Affairs and Khomeini's official pilgrimage representative, Mehdi Karrubi. As Khomeini's spokesman, Karrubi asked only that Iran be allowed to conduct its demonstration in Mecca as in past years. An Iranian official even covered the route of the planned demonstration with a Saudi official, and it clearly ended 1.5 kilometers short of the Great Mosque. But, despite this understanding and the absence of any incident during the earlier march in Medina, the Saudi authorities remained deeply suspicious. On the eve of the Mecca demonstration, they pressured Karrubi to cancel the march, lest violence break out. Karrubi refused, and declared that "in the event of disorder and disruption, the responsibility for this will be fully with the Saudi government."[26] Two days before the planned demonstration, the Iranian media published Khomeini's annual message to the pilgrims. Although longer and more high-strung than the messages of recent years, it did not constitute a

major departure from the understanding regarding the pilgrimage itself. Khomeini included the customary plea to pilgrims that they "avoid clashes, insults, and disputes" and warned against those intent on disruption "who might embark on spontaneous moves."[27]

The Understanding Destroyed

The atmosphere in Mecca was charged with tension on July 31, the day of the planned demonstration. Many units of Saudi security forces were in evidence throughout the city, and at the Great Mosque, where the usual Saudi "morality" police were replaced by armed soldiers. For the first time, guards at the gate subjected entering pilgrims to full body searches and forbade pilgrims from carrying anything into the Great Mosque, including sun umbrellas and canteens.[28] These measures apparently reflected a Saudi intelligence estimate that an attempted Iranian takeover of the Great Mosque was a real possibility.

In the afternoon, the demonstrations began in the usual fashion, with slogans and speeches. The march commenced upon the conclusion of the speeches; as in the past, it was led by *chador*-clad women and war invalids. At or near the end of the planned route, the march came upon a cordon of Saudi riot police and National Guardsmen who refused to allow the procession to go any further. This dangerous situation became explosive in the wake of two developments. Apparently, some within the crowd of Iranian pilgrims chose this moment to echo Khoiniha's provocative demand and called upon the marchers to continue to the Great Mosque. At the same time (or perhaps even earlier), unidentified persons in an adjacent parking garage began to pelt the Iranian demonstrators with bricks, pieces of concrete, and iron bars. This exacerbated the situation on the confrontation line between the pilgrims and the police, and both sides began to exchange blows, the police using truncheons and electric prods; the demonstrators using sticks, knives, and rocks. Because Karrubi and the other Iranian officials had not positioned themselves at the head of the march, they had no control over the conduct of Iran's pilgrims at the crucial point of contact with Saudi police. During the ensuing confrontation, the Saudis backed down temporarily, and the crowd surged forward. According to American intelligence sources, the tide finally was turned by reinforcements from the National Guard, who fired tear gas shells into the crowd and then opened fire with pistols and

automatic weapons.[29] The Saudis have denied firing on the demonstrators or even using tear gas, claiming instead that the demonstrators, once dispersed, surged in retreat. According to the Saudis, those who died were trampled to death. According to official Saudi figures, 402 people died in the clash, including 275 Iranian pilgrims, 85 Saudi police, and 42 pilgrims from other countries. Iran claimed that 400 Iranian pilgrims died and that several thousand were injured.

This reconstruction rests upon a selective reading of the contradictory accounts provided by Iranian and Saudi sources.[30] As no independent investigation will ever be conducted, important details will remain in doubt. But no evidence has been produced by Saudi Arabia or Iran to establish that the other side acted deliberately or with premeditation to provoke violence. The evidence now available indicates that a group of undisciplined Iranian pilgrims, acting under the influence of at least one provocative statement by a leading Iranian official, wished to enter the Great Mosque as demonstrators. Saudi security authorities, who had been alerted to this possibility but lacked self-confidence in the face of provocation, employed deadly force to thwart the Iranian crowd.

Whereas the actual events in Mecca remained shrouded by irreconcilable claims, there could be no doubt about the immediate effect of the deaths at Mecca in revalidating hoary prejudices. The accusations that flew in both directions after the incident had few parallels in their intensity. Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin ᶜAbd al-ᶜAziz relied upon Sunni prejudice when he charged that the real objective of the Iranian pilgrims was "to spoil the pilgrimage, because, as is known, the pilgrimage is done only if the Great Mosque is entered." Iranian "sedition" inside the Great Mosque would have made it impossible for other pilgrims to have carried out the required circumambulations in the Great Mosque. "The pilgrimage would have been spoilt."[31] There is no evidence that the Iranian demonstrators, even those who wished to carry their protest into the Great Mosque, intended to ruin the rite for other pilgrims. But by his charge Nayif sought to associate the Iranian demonstrators with the legendary Shiᶜite "defilers" of the Great Mosque.

Iranian statements pandered to the belief still held by Shiᶜites that the fanatic Saudis were driven by their own misguided beliefs to kill innocent Shiᶜite pilgrims. Khomeini declared that the Saudi rulers, "these vile and ungodly Wahhabis, are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back," and announced that Mecca was in the hands of "a band of heretics."[32] Once more, the

Saudis were transformed into what speaker of the parliament ᶜAli Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani called "Wahhabi hooligans." Rafsanjani recalled the nineteenth-century Wahhabi massacres (of Shiᶜites) in Najf and Karbala, the Wahhabi destruction of Islamic monuments in Medina (venerated by Shiᶜites), and the Wahhabi burning of libraries (containing Shiᶜite works). The Wahhabis "will commit any kind of crime. I ask you to pay more attention to the history of that evil clique so that you can see what kind of creatures they have been in the course of their history."[33] This represented a deliberate attempt to fuel a present crisis with the memory of past sectarian hatreds.

Following the Mecca tragedy, both Saudi Arabia and Iran conducted large-scale campaigns to influence Muslim opinion abroad. The Saudi government ordered its principal missionary organization, the Muslim World League, to convene an Islamic conference in Mecca in October 1987. More than 600 supporters and clients of Saudi Arabia from 134 countries attended the conference, which was opened by Saudi King Fahd. As expected, the conference condemned Iran alone for the Mecca violence: the Iranian government—"accustomed to terrorism and a thirst for Muslim blood"—"solely bears the responsibility for the outrage in God's holy mosque." The measures taken by the Saudi authorities "to quell the sedition and to contain the fires of wickedness were legitimate."[34] Iran immediately attacked the conference in Mecca as one more attempt by the Saudis to "buy the religion of Muslims."[35] Saudi Shiᶜite opposition sources charged that the Saudis had spent $470 million on the conference, and that total expenses were liable to reach $700 million.[36] The conference, far from being Islamic, had a narrowly Sunni, Wahhabi, and Saudi orientation, said its Iranian critics; it was a conference of men of religion who served the rulers, not the religion.[37]

The following month, Iran convened an International Congress on Safeguarding the Sanctity and Security of the Great Mosque, under the auspices of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and the Foreign Ministry. Rafsanjani, in addressing the 300 participants from thirty-six countries, called for the "liberation" of Mecca and the establishment of an Islamic International that would govern Mecca as a free city.[38] Ayatollah Montazeri, who met with the foreign guests, denounced the Saudis as "a bunch of English agents from Najd who have no respect either for the House of God or for the pilgrims who are the guests of God." Just as Jerusalem would be liberated from the "claws of usurping Israel," Mecca and Medina would be liberated from the "claws of Al Saᶜud."[39] A Sunni cleric at the conference

apparently took the analogy still further, denouncing the Saudis as Jews. An Iranian pilgrimage official noted that the Iranians themselves had not labeled the Saudis Jews, but "even if we do not agree that you are Jews, your deeds are worse than those of the Jews. What you did to Muslims in the House of God has never been done to Muslims by the Jews."[40] The insinuation that the Saudis were Jews—the worst possible libel—echoed an old piece of Shi^{c}ite bigotry that attributed Jewish origins to the Saudi ruling family.[41] The Tehran resolutions were repeated by Iranian-inspired seminars on the pilgrimage that subsequently met in Beirut and Lahore. The Saudis also convened supporting conferences elsewhere, most notably in London, where Saudi clients declared support for the use of force in quelling Iranian "sedition."[42]

After the initial round of conferences, the polemical debate shifted to the next pilgrimage. The Saudis were reluctant to impose an outright ban on Iran's pilgrims, lest they open themselves to the charge of denying Muslims the chance to meet a fundamental obligation of Islam. But the Saudis clearly sought to translate the tragedy into a far-reaching revision of the informal understanding that had come apart in 1987 and that had become a thorn in the side of Saudi security.

First, Saudi officials, citing wider Muslim support for their version of the 1987 tragedy, made it absolutely clear that no demonstration would be allowed in 1988. The demonstrations that Khomeini had attempted to introduce as part of the pilgrimage ritual—and that the Saudis had tolerated—would no longer be permitted. The Saudis then moved to cut the number of Iran's pilgrims, who at 150,000 per year had come to constitute the largest national group. The move won full endorsement from the foreign ministers' conference of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, meeting in Amman in March 1988. This gathering placed the blame for the tragedy in Mecca squarely on the shoulders of Iran's pilgrims and voiced its support for Saudi measures to prevent a repetition of the violence. But, most important, the conference supported a Saudi proposal to limit the number of pilgrims by establishing national quotas for pilgrims, based upon each country's population.

The ostensible aim was to give Saudi Arabia a three-year interlude to expand and improve facilities in Mecca. Although these facilities needed modernization, the most important effect of the planned quota of 1000 pilgrims per million population would be a drastic cut in the number of Iran's pilgrims, from 150,000 to 45,000. The Saudis, of

course, were fully aware of Khomeini's stand that any cut in the number of Iran's pilgrims would result in an Iranian boycott of the pilgrimage. At the same time, Saudi Arabia chose this moment to sever relations with Iran. Saudi Arabia had not severed relations with Iran after the violence of 1987, despite the storming of the Saudi legation building by a Tehran crowd and the resulting death of a Saudi diplomat. Relations were severed only eight months later, when this served the clear purpose of making it impossible for Iranian pilgrims to secure pilgrims' visas. The Iranian government, with the sanction of a ruling by Khomeini, then elected to boycott the pilgrimage altogether. The monarchy had taken the same measure on two earlier occasions in this century: there was nothing revolutionary in this tried and tested Iranian response to the escalation of sectarian tensions.

The intense polemical exchange that accompanied the 1988 pilgrimage also followed precedent. The Saudi Council of Ministers declared that the Iranians, by "causing havoc" during the pilgrimage, had "moved outside the Islamic consensus."[43] The Iranians accused the Saudis of preventing Muslims from fulfilling the fundamental obligation of pilgrimage. Any Muslim with the means to perform the pilgrimage was entitled to do so; the Saudi implementation of a quota system demonstrated their incompetence.[44] In Khomeini's message marking the first anniversary of the "massacre," he accused the "centers of Wahhabism" of "sedition and espionage." At Mecca in 1987, "the sword of blasphemy and divison, which had been hidden in the hypocritical cloak of Yazid's followers and descendants of the Umayyad dynasty, God's curse be upon them, had to come out again from the same cloak of Abu Sufyan's heirs to destroy and kill."[45] Whatever his intention, Khomeini's resort to this historical analogy constituted a sectarian allusion—despite his claim, in the very same message, that it was the United States and the Saudis who tried to portray the Mecca events as a sectarian clash.

Restoring the Pilgrimage Peace

The absence of Iranian pilgrims in 1988 brought an enforced truce to the pilgrimage but not a peace. The polemical debate between Saudi Arabia and Iran did not abate, forcing the Saudis to police the pilgrimage of 1988 to a degree never before witnessed by pilgrims. The cease-fire between Iran and Iraq that followed later in the summer held out the prospect of a future reconciliation, but this would require

negotiations almost as delicate and complicated as those between Iran and Iraq.

A political reconciliation conceivably could restore mutual civility during the sacred season of pilgrimage. But the deterioration had not been the sole product of the Persian Gulf crisis. Certainly the evolving rift between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the war determined the timing of the pilgrimage crisis. But the unprecedented intensity of that controversy, culminating in bloodshed, had its roots in sectarian prejudice. Once political differences combined with sectarian bigotries, they interacted as two volatile elements to produce an explosion. It was not simply that the Saudis and Iranians championed two different views of Islam. Beyond present differences, the intensity of their struggle derived from the long history of conflict and mutual intolerance that these rival interpretations of Islam already shared.

Today it seems as though Iran has lost the struggle to redefine the pilgrimage for other Muslims. To the extent that Muslims have tended to interpret the deaths in Mecca within their respective sectarian traditions, the Saudi version of the events has enjoyed the wider credibility in the Muslim world. Iran's marches in Medina and Mecca were devoted to "unity" and "the disavowal of infidels." But the little Muslim unity produced by Iran's pilgrimage policy was directed and orchestrated by Saudi Arabia against Iran's pilgrimage message. The Iranians, keen to disavow the "infidels," have found themselves disavowed and effectively barred from Mecca.

Much more has been lost in the struggle for Mecca than Iran's hopes for mobilizing the masses of Muslim pilgrims against the enemies of Islam. A price has been paid by all Islam. The pilgrimage controversy has torn open the unhealed sectarian wounds on the body politic of Islam. Iranian and Saudi attempts to unite Muslims have only sharpened the divisions among them, particularly along the dangerous fault lines of sectarian bigotry. And the pilgrimage itself, the supposed symbol of Islam's overriding unity, has become a tinderbox.

12. See the works of G. Scholem mentioned earlier and his introduction to *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton, N.J., 1973).

13. Y. Ben-Nun, *Nekuda* no. 53 (1983) [Hebrew].

14. M. Ben-Yosef, *Nekuda* no. 80 (1984) [Hebrew].

15. Y. Etzion and other "Messiah Men," quoting the relatively unknown teachings of S. Ben-Dov.

16. H. Porat, *Ptahim* (March 1975) [Hebrew].

17. See, for example, H. Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1965).

18. Personal interview with Y. Michaelowitz.

19. See the works of G. Scholem, especially *Mitzva Haba'a Beᶜavira*," *Knesset* 2 (1937) [Hebrew].

Chapter 8

1. Khamene'i sermon, Radio Tehran (August 6, 1987); quoted in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts: The Middle East and Africa* (hereafter, *BBC Summary*) (August 7, 1987).

2. On the doctrinal shift from pilgrimage to visitation, see Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 168–70.

3. Richard Burton, *Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina* (ed. London, 1893), p. 168; John Lewis Burckhardt, *Travels in Arabia* (ed. London, 1829), pp. 168, and 251–52.

4. Burton, ibid.

5. On these taxes, see H. Kazem Zadeh, "Relation d'un pèlerinage à la Mecque," *Revue du Monde musulman* (Paris), no. 19 (1912): 159–60.

6. C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century* (Leiden, 1931), p. 141.

7. A general history of Wahhabi-Shiᶜite relations is provided by ᶜAli Asghar Faqihi, *Vahhabiyan* (Tehran, 1352/1973–1974).

8. Quoted by H. St. J. B. Philby, *Arabia of the Wahhabis* (London, 1928), p. 67.

9. On the special place of Medina in Shiᶜite Islam, see Dwight M. Donaldson, *The Shiᶜite Religion* (London, 1933), pp. 142–51. On the cemetery's history, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed. (Leiden), q. v. "Bakiᶜ al-Gharkad" (A. J. Wensinck-[A.S. Bazmee Ansaril]), vol. 1, pp. 957–58.

10. For the text of the *fatwa* that sanctioned the demolition, see Hasan Sadr al-Din Kazimi, *al-Radd ᶜala fatawa al-wahhabiyyin* (Baghdad, 1344/1925–1926). For a description of the demolition, see Eldon Rutter, *The Holy Cities of Arabia* (London, 1930), pp. 562–64.

11. This and other episodes in modern Saudi-Iranian relations are discussed on the basis of original documents in a publication of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Ravabit-i dowlat-i Shahanshahi Iran ba-doval-i khavar-i mianeh* (Tehran, 1976), pp. 61–89.

12. *Oriente Moderno* 6 (1926): 310, 513–14, and 600.

13. *Oriente Moderno* 7 (1927): 99 and 111–12.

14. *Oriente Moderno* 10 (1930): 105–106.

15. The evolution of this policy is detailed by Jacob Goldberg, "The Shiᶜite Minority in Saudi Arabia," in *Shiᶜism and Social Protest*, ed. Juan R. I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven, Conn., 1986), pp. 230–46.

16. As reported by James S. Moose (Jidda), dispatch of February 24, 1944, National Archives, Washington, Record Group 59, 890 f. 404/55.

17. Ali Shariati, *Hajj*, 2d ed. (Bedford, Ohio, 1978), p. 109.

18. Khomeini's message to the pilgrims (February 6, 1971), in *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley, Calif., 1981), pp. 195–99.

19. A full treatment of the pilgrimage since Iran's revolution may be found in M. Kramer's essays in the annual *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, beginning with volume six (covering 1981–1982). For a very different approach, see R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 91–100 and 111–12.

20. Full text of Khalid-Khomeini exchange is in *al-Nashra al-ᶜarabiyya li'l-hizb al-jumhuri al-islami* (Tehran) (21 Dhu al-Hijja 1401/October 19, 1981); and in *Sawt al-umma* (Tehran) (October 31, 1981).

21. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed. (Leiden), q.v. "Bast" (R. M. Savory), vol. 1, p. 1088.

22. For a description of the site's desolation as late as 1974, see Wa'il Saᶜid ᶜAli al-Wa'ili, *Mi'a sura wa-sura ᶜan istiqhlal duyuf al-rahman* (n.p., c. 1981), pp. 524–25.

23. The figure was given by Mehdi Karrubi, Tehran television (June 16, 1988) in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report: The Middle East and South Asia* (henceforth, *FBIS*) (June 21, 1988). The same need explains Iranian Shiᶜism's rediscovery of the mausoleum of Sayyida Zaynab, the Imam Husayn's sister, near Damascus. A minor site of Shiᶜite visitation in the

past, it has now been transformed into a major shrine, visited by thousands of Shiᶜites from Iran and Iranian-backed Shiᶜites from the Lebanese Hizballah. Iran has also invested large resources in restoration of the still lesser shrine of Sayyida Raqiya, Husayn's daughter, near the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. On these sites, see Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti, "A proposito della comunità imamita contemporanea di Siria," *Oriento Moderno*, new series, 3, no. 7–12 (July–December 1984): 193–201.

24. Text of speech, Radio Tehran (July 2, 1987), in *BBC Summary* (July 4, 1987).

25. Saudi Press Agency (July 3, 1987), quoted in *BBC Summary* (July 6, 1987).

26. Radio Tehran (July 30, 1987), quoted in *BBC Summary* (August 1, 1987).

27. Text of speech, Radio Tehran (July 29, 30, and 31, 1987), quoted in *BBC Summary* (July 31, August 1 and 3, 1987).

28. Fahd al-Qahtani, *Majzarat Makka: Qissat al-madhbaha al-Saᶜudiyya li'l-hujja* (London, 1988), pp. 27–28.

29. Report on the assessment of American intelligence sources, *New York Times* (September 6, 1987).

30. The most detailed eyewitness accounts from a pro-Iranian perspective include that of the Pakistani Shiᶜite journalist Mushahid Hussain, which appeared in the *Washington Post* (August 20, 1987), and the several reports collected by Qahtani, *Majzarat Makka*, pp. 77–107. Qahtani's book is an extensive survey of the event and the worldwide reaction to it. The Saudi director-general of public security, General ᶜAbdallah bin ᶜAbd al-Rahman Al Shaykh, provided the most comprehensive Saudi account in a statement, which prefaced a special Saudi documentary film on the incident, aired on Saudi television on August 20, 1987.

31. Nayif press conference, Saudi Press Agency (August 25, 1987), quoted in *BBC Summary* (August 27, 1987).

32. Khomeini's message to Karrubi, Radio Tehran (August 3, 1987), quoted in *BBC Summary* (August 5, 1987).

33. Text of Rafsanjani's speech to protest march in Tehran, Radio Tehran (August 2, 1987), quoted in *BBC Summary* (August 4, 1987).

34. Text of communiqué, Saudi Press Agency (October 15, 1987), quoted in *FBIS* (October 16, 1987).

35. *Al-ᶜAhd* (Beirut) (October 23, 1987).

36. *Al-Thawra al-Islamiyya* (London) (October 1987).

37. *Ibid.*

38. Rafsanjani's speech, Radio Tehran (November 26, 1987), quoted in FBIS (November 28, 1987).

39. Montazeri's speech, Radio Tehran (November 27), quoted in *FBIS* (November 29, 1987).

40. Report of speech by Emami-Jamarani (April 29, 1988), quoted in *FBIS* (May 2, 1988).

41. For a Shiᶜite compendium of alleged proofs of the Jewish origins of the Saudis, see Nasir al-Saᶜid, *Tarikh Al Saᶜud* (Beirut, n.d.), vol. 1, pp. 392–403. I am indebted to Werner Ende for this reference.

42. Report of conference, *al-Sharq al-awsat* (London) (July 4, 1988).

43. Saudi Council of Ministers statement, Saudi Press Agency (June 28, 1988), quoted in *FBIS* (June 30, 1988).

44. Mehdi Karrubi, Tehran television (June 16, 1988), quoted by *FBIS*, (June 21, 1988).

45. Message of Khomeini on occasion of the Mecca "massacre" and Iran's acceptance of U.N. Resolution 598, Radio Tehran (July 20, 1988), quoted in *FBIS* (July 21, 1988). Abu Sufyan was a member of the Prophet Muhammad's tribe who had originally opposed Muhammad; his son, Yazid, was responsible for killing the Imam Husayn; and another son, Muᶜawiya, founded the Umayyad dynasty. The family and the dynasty are deemed usurpers in the Shiᶜite reading of early Islamic history.